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Still making history

PARNELL K3009

by Andrew Roberts

Hamker Racing Ltd



Richard Last getting to grips with K3009.
 Photo: Andrew Roberts

When HGPCA member John Ure drove Tony Ditheridge's Parnell K3 back into the Goodwood Revival pit bay having vanquished a quartet of ERA's and quietly remarking that this was the best handling historic race car he had ever driven, far away in the Elysian paddock of yesteryear a smile of modest satisfaction might well have creased over the face of its erstwhile owner, Reg Parnell. For, developing K3009, the chassis number of this unique MG, into a highly competitive monoposto racing car of the 1930s had always been the aim and here it was achieving the goals set for it over seventy years ago.

Setting aside today's history for a moment to go back to K3009's beginnings, this was one of the 1933 model K3s delivered to first owner Robin Mere with a slab tank two-seater body, pre-selector gearbox and the supercharged six-cylinder engine that would ultimately humble Maserati in the Mille Miglia



At the Brooklands International Trophy in April 1934 the newly rebodied K3009 debuted in the hands of Hugh 'Hammy' Hamilton, here leading the Froy MG K3 and the Richardson Riley.
 Photo: The Light Car



and deliver the 1933 Ulster TT victory in the hands of Tazio Nuvolari. The price was £795 ex-works, a far from inconsiderable sum at the time but the growing racing reputation of MG and the Abingdon factory ensured that well-heeled sporting-minded motorists were more than keen to get behind the wheel of a car they could drive quickly on the road and race at Brooklands or Donington Park at the weekend. This was precisely the early history of

K3009, with appearances at both venues in the hands of its owner-driver, its best performances coming at Donington with a second and third placing gained. But recognising that his talents as a racing driver were decidedly limited, Robin Mere decided on a change for the following year.

For the 1934 season the Mere K3 would be in the hands of Hugh ‘Hammy’ Hamilton, a driver whose abilities saw him described like his 21st century namesake as the best driver of his era. By then K3009 had been fitted with a new offset single-seater body by Hamilton – amazingly without Mere’s sanction - and it made its debut in this form at the Brooklands International Trophy Meeting in April. Although unplaced the car’s form impressed, but a further entry in the Mannin Beg on the Isle of Man saw the Irishman crashing out, despite impressive speed. Historian Mike Allison notes that the MG works supplied parts at advantageous rates as a result of Hamilton’s potential and success followed rapidly. First Hamilton took the 1100cc class victory at the 21.5km Klausen Mountain Hillclimb in Switzerland, followed by an outright win on the



Donington Park grid scene with beautifully presented K3009. Photo: Donington Collection archive.

Coppa Acerbo in Italy, where he led home an MG 1,2,3. Tragically Hamilton’s undoubted talents would remain unrealised, following his death in a Maserati at the Swiss Grand Prix.

K3009 now changed hands, to the successful MG driver R.T. ‘Ronnie’ Horton and this resulted in further activity for the Magnette, although major success was proving elusive. Class second at the Shelsley Walsh hillclimb, a seventh place at Donington in the Nuffield Trophy and a second in the BARC October Handicap at Brooklands ended a season that disappointed by Horton’s standards. So it was no surprise that despite lapping at 115.5 mph in the Brooklands Easter Meeting K3009 was unplaced and its new owner decided enough was enough.

The Parnell Years

So entered the owner and driver, Reg Parnell, who will always be associated with this K3, chassis K3009 forever being known as the Parnell K3. There would be no dramatic change of fortune for the 1935 season but Donington Park would figure strongly in the car’s entries, being domiciled at the family garage in nearby Derby. The K3 was unplaced in the Nuffield Trophy but took the winner’s garland later in the summer. Back at Brooklands the BRDC 500-Mile race yielded another retirement, this time with a broken piston.

Prior to the 1937 season K3009 was transformed into a very different looking single-seater. Now the driver sat centrally, as in an ERA or Maserati, there was a new lightweight body but the most profound change came in the fitting of a new twin overhead camshaft cylinder head.

The new cylinder head was derived from the special four-cylinder version used on the 750cc Bellevue Garage R-types. After the racing withdrawal of MG in 1935 there was no further factory support forthcoming and any further development now became be the sole responsibility of owners and independent teams. The Evans family commissioned a new cylinder head from Michael McEvoy with technical input from Lawrence Pomeroy Junior. The parts were made by Frank McEvoy in Derby but all the assembly and testing was carried out at Wandsworth as ‘Wilkie’ Wilkinson recalled. It was running in the Evans R-type by April 1936, producing 100bhp

There was an informal arrangement between Parnell and Bellevue who used the Derby garage facilities whenever they raced their MG entries at Donington. The Evans R-type was purchased and subsequently raced by Joe Ashmore (friend of Parnell and later business partner) while at the same time Reg Parnell purchased the design rights and jigs. The new layout for the six-cylinder head was achieved by adding the extra pair of cylinders to the middle of the head, as the plug layout shows. The pattern for the new head was cast by a local foundry and once machined and installed it considerably enhanced K3009’s performance, although the engine capacity remained at 1100cc.

The virtually re-engineered K3 took time to bed in with appearances at Brooklands, Donington Park and Crystal Palace, but these failed to yield placings. The tide turned at the Mannin Beg where a 12th place finish was achieved but the real breakthrough came at the Brooklands



At its ‘home’ circuit of Donington Park Reg Parnell with K3009. Photo: private collection.

July meeting with a first in Handicap and a first in the 1100cc race. Retirement in the JCC International Trophy after running a strong third followed but there was a third placing in the Crystal Palace Cup as compensation.

During practice for the BRDC 500-Mile Race Reg Parnell and K3009 were involved in a major accident with Kay Petre. Contemporary reports state that the K3 slid down the banking hitting the rear of the lower circulating Petre Works Austin causing it to roll. Kay Petre was badly injured but recovered, although she would never race again. As a consequence Parnell’s licence was revoked for two years, hence his lack of cockpit time pre-war.

Rather than wait out his licence suspension Parnell instigated further improvements to K3009. The most obvious change was the fitting of Lancia Augusta front suspension, with the beam front axle of K3009 being removed.



Prior to the start of the 1938 Donington Grand Prix, Cuddon-Fletcher and MG K3009. Photo: Ludvigsen Library.

It would get a further lease of life in J.H.T. Smith’s MG K3. A.F Cuddon-Fletcher now joined the Parnell equipe – one reference indicates that there was possibly a partnership – and he would be the K3’s main driver throughout 1938. W. G. ‘Bill’ Everitt drove the car initially at Crystal Palace and Donington but it was not to taste success until the J.C.C. International Trophy at Brooklands when Cuddon-Fletcher joined him. Along with the Smith K3 and a Riley, K3009 made up the trio to gain the team prize.



Early stage of the memorable 1938 Donington Grand Prix as Cuddon-Fletcher in K3009 chases the Hansom Atta. Photo: Private Collection



Chasing down the Alta of G.Taylor on the Campbell Circuit at Brooklands in 1937. Photo: ABS/Keystone

Always beautifully prepared, K3009 now took a string of good results. Cuddon-Fletcher took a win at the Brooklands Whitsun Meeting, a third at the London Grand Prix at Crystal Palace, a second in the Donington Junior Handicap and a brace of wins in the 1100cc class at

Brooklands in the J.C.C. 200-Mile Race and the BRDC Road Race, followed by a second and third place at the Brooklands September Meeting. Further outings included an 8th place finish at Crystal Palace in the Imperial Trophy and two retirements at Brooklands.



Final flourish for K3009 as storm clouds gathered in 1939. Photo:Ferret Fotografics

Now came the highest profile race of the year, the Donington Grand Prix that saw the mighty Silver Arrows of Mercedes-Benz and Auto-Union thrilling amazed spectators as they thundered around the Donington Park circuit. Ranged against these leviathans were what would inevitably be the also-rans, comprising ERA, Riley, Maserati, Alta, Delahaye and MG. Cuddon-Fletcher’s race in K3009 ended on lap 17 when he left the track at Melbourne Corner, in the wake of an Auto Union. Everyone present always recalled the electrifying performance of Tazio Nuvolari, who finished over a minute-and-a-half ahead of the second-place Mercedes-Benz in one of the greatest Grand Prix victories ever.

If war clouds had hovered ominously over the two Donington Grands Prix, the 1939 racing season was inevitably dominated by the increasing imminence of conflict and in the event it would prove to be the year that Brooklands ran its final race. Reg Parnell had sold the K3 to Ian Nickols who embarked on what would inevitably be a truncated season, with the car now repainted Cream. Appearances

at the March Brooklands Meeting, the British Empire Trophy at Donington and Brooklands BARC Meeting yielded little, but fortunes turned at the Surrey track in the JCC International Trophy with a sixth-place finish.

Despite the threat of war motor racing continued regardless, with K3009 appearing at the BARC Whitsun Brooklands and the Sydenham Trophy at Crystal Palace where it finished fourth in its heat. June saw the final Donington meeting where the pre-race article in The Light Car commented on the K3 now running in 1486cc guise as being designed for use in Grand Prix racing should the Formula be changed to 1.5 litre cars. The BARC August Meeting saw Ian Nickols winning the Mountain Race in what was the final Brooklands Meeting after 32 years of racing. Finally, both the now licence-restored Reg Parnell and Ian Nickols ran K3009 in the heats of the Imperial Trophy at Crystal Palace. The days of the pre-war racing era had ended.

A New Era

Despite hostilities and the sadly inevitable losses of both drivers and cars, K3009 and its owner were ready to resume competition when peace returned. As early as June 1946 the famous Prescott Hill Climb resumed and the now familiar pairing posted a class third. In September the same year came an event whose significance could not be underestimated. The



Cambridge University Automobile Club had arranged the loan of Gransden Lodge Airfield and laid out a triangular course utilizing two runways and the perimeter track. The Brooklands Campbell Circuit or Donington Park it certainly wasn't, but it was as close to road racing as it was possible to get in those austere post-war days. K3009 was not only present with Ian Nickols but was thrilling the huge crowd of some 15,000 and winning the 1100cc class.

Such was the success of the event that it pointed the way for circuits as yet unborn, including both Goodwood and Silverstone. With no permanent circuits in the UK events were mostly limited to hill climbs. For racing it was overseas, or the Isle of Man or Jersey. 1947 saw an entry in the Coupe de Lyon ending in retirement, a similar result being suffered at the Manx Cup Races in 1947/8



Early post war racing frequently meant taking a trip away from the mainland and K3009 was no exception; Ian Nickols competing on the Isle of Man in 1948. Photo: Guy Griffiths Collection

and the J.C.C. Meeting at Goodwood. By now the K3 was increasingly regarded as an ageing racing car and it was sold via Brian Finglass of Speed Models in Notting Hill Gate to J. H. Webb of the famous lead crystal glass family who recalled that Nickols found himself too bulky to fit comfortably into the cockpit. John Webb ran K3009 with some success in the 1949 Brighton Speed Trials and at Prescott and Shelsley the same season. A third place in the Vintage Sports Car Club's 1950 Seaman Trophy at Silverstone was followed by an entry in the Ulster Trophy Handicap Race and another third placing at BARC Goodwood the same year, confounding the naysayers and proving the K3's continuing competitiveness. As if to further emphasise this the Webb/K3009 combination posted a class third at the Castle Combe Bristol MC Meeting that rounded off a successful season.



The Twilight Years

Now the name of Jack Turner enters K3009's history. Turner had already prepared the car for John Webb so was well aware of its potential and had the idea of installing an ERA engine into the K3. Appealing as the idea was it was stillborn, since no deal could be agreed with the spares source. In 1951 the twin-cam engine from K3009 was removed and installed in a Turner chassis. This ran successfully in the Turner-MG Special during the 1951/52 seasons, the car being prepared by Jack Turner and running with a two-stage Wade supercharger. In early 1953 the Turner MG changed hands and a couple of years later ownership changed again. It was last seen in the UK racing at Davidstow in 1954. Almost certainly car and engine ended up in the USA but what is definitely known is that



At a streaming wet Brooklands Ian Nickols heads down the Campbell Circuit in the 1939 International Trophy. Photo LAT Images

Roger Sweet was driving the KN single-seat racing car built for him by MG specialist Bob Jones. He learned of the Crown US connection with its various K3 acquisitions, including the dismantled Turner-MG with its Parnell twin cam engine. Could he get the cylinder head and other components for the KN? Patient negotiation paid off and Sweet acquired both the twin cam cylinder head and block from him. Suffice to say that the use of this head ensured that the KN became a front-runner in vintage and historic events. It would prove even more significant in the restoration of K3009, although that lay in the future.

Moving on, things had begun to look up for the once unloved K3. In 1985 the car had been sold to the late Peter Gregory who had a significant reputation in bringing such cars back to life. K3009 was no exception and the painstakingly rebuilt car, but now fitted with a single ohc head, lived again, running in 1988 VSCC events with the restorer at the wheel, before being sold via Douglas Jamieson to Peter Agg in 1989.

At the end of 1992 K3009 would move on once again to join the stable of new owner Philip Walker, no stranger to Triple-M MG models. He was, and remains, a rapid historic racer with the VSCC, MGCC and HGPCA so K3009 was in good hands to restart its career as a significant historic racing car, appearing at various VSCC events. He and Peter Gregory were keen to reunite the K3 with its original engine but the chance of using the twin cam head had seemingly disappeared following damage from Roger Sweet's mechanical failure in Thailand. Bob Jones considered that a redesigned head, externally original but with its weaknesses

addressed, was the way forward. The new head was manufactured but during testing part of the K3's pre-selector gearbox disintegrated, bursting the casing and causing serious injury to Philip's legs and a long and painful recovery. K3009 was restored to health rather more quickly but remained unused.

The Renaissance Years

However a new owner in the person of Richard Last, an exceptional engineer and no mean historic driver, was the perfect prescription for K3009 in the summer of 1999. Just as Philip Walker had striven for authenticity this too would be the ongoing goal for Richard Last. Assuredly K3009 now had the best possible custodian. Now, a decade after its initial restoration, Richard Last similarly made the decision to prepare K3009 back to its twin cam configuration.

Roger Sweet had to step away from the MG KN cockpit for serious health reasons and consequently the original head now became available, soon finding itself a step away from its former Parnell MG location. But, as Philip Walker had discovered, the seasons of hard racing had irreparably taken their toll. So, Richard Last pondered, could a replica head be manufactured and if so would it be sanctioned? Remanufacture was certainly feasible, but would it be given the green light?

Fortunately the VSCC gave the project their blessing, provided this replacement was an exact replica and remained a strictly unique one-off. So K3009 was back to its late period racing specification, demonstrating its newly-realised potential with a superb fourth place in Richard Last's hands at the 2010 Monaco





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Historique Grand Prix. In 2012 Richard Last and Oliver Richardson commenced a comprehensive rebuild that included a complete strip-down, straightening and repairs to the chassis rails, together with individual component inspection. Every detail was minutely checked, not for nothing is the name of Richard Last highly regarded in the F1 fraternity.

The first outing for the refettled K3009 was June 1999 at the MG Car Club International Weekend, which celebrated MG's 75th anniversary. It would also be the first time raced with the reconstructed twin cam engine since Goodwood in 1950. There would also be a happy return to Donington the following year with the VSCC, while other venues have been quick to seize the opportunity of a significant 'new' entry. Appearances at the Monaco Historic Grand Prix, Coys International Historic Festival and the Oldtimer Grand Prix and countless UK and European circuits and events are the icing on the cake. Very quickly the K3/Last combination was posting good results and class finishes and an outright victory on its home circuit of Silverstone. K3009 has also become a welcome and regular Goodwood Revival entry and a favourite with spectators, some of those still recalling its appearances at the famous post-war venue in 1948-1950.

The one certain and recurring pattern on the historic motorsport scene is that cars will move on and K3009 is ample proof of that with its many changes of title. Anyone with a historic car rightly regards themselves as a custodian, rather than an owner and ideally will look for an appreciative new home. For Richard Last and K3009 this is precisely the scenario that has played out with historic restorer and racer, not to mention accomplished pilot, restorer and aviation guru Tony Ditheridge, who is now its current custodian. In his care this very special K3 is in the best of hands, totally appreciated, regularly raced and fettled and no doubt enjoying the proximity of another '30s icon, the Hawker Hurricane. Reg Parnell would surely approve. 🍷

Grateful acknowledgement to MG K3 Dossier by Mike Hawke and the unstinting assistance of Richard Last and Oliver Richardson.



Photo: Andrew Roberts



Photo: Andrew Roberts

